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SUBJECT: COUNCIL OF EX-MUSLIMS CHALLENGES GERMAN GOVERNMENT'S ISLAM
CONFERENCE

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1. (SBU) Summary: At its first conference May 31-June 1, the German "Council of Ex-Muslims" challenged the annual Islam Conference hosted by Federal Interior Minister Schaeuble, criticizing him for approaching the question of integration of immigrants in terms of religion and attempting to strengthen their "religious identity." The organizers, whose leader is a controversial Iranian exile activist, argued that integration in Germany cannot be achieved by encouraging the supporters of conservative Islam, whom they consider overrepresented in the Interior Ministry's Islam Conference, but rather by affirming the democratic values of individual freedom, freedom of expression, equality of sexes and adherence to universal human rights. Panelists and audience members expressed concern that the focus on religion as key in the integration process was not only counterproductive to integration but a threat to democracy and free public discourse.

2. (SBU) Summary continued: The conference's closing statement reiterated the Council's criticism of Islam and conservative Muslim groups in Germany and called for a stronger emphasis on secular education, the freedom to criticize Islam and human rights violations perpetrated in its name, as well as diplomatic advocacy with Muslim countries for improved human rights in those countries. While the Council raises important issues about the German government's approach to integration, its often uncompromising stance may limit its appeal to a broader German audience. End Summary.

3. (U) PA Cultural Specialist attended the first "Critical Islam Conference" (www.kritische-islamkonferenz.de) which took place in Cologne May 31-June 1, 2008. The conference was attended by about 150 people, mostly concerned citizens, activists affiliated with critical Islam or left-of-center political groups, students and journalists. About 20 percent in the audience had an immigrant background. It was hosted by the German "Council of ex-Muslims," founded in February 2007 and claiming about 500 members. The chair, Iranian-born Mina Ahadi (51), explained in her opening speech that her purpose was to criticize the focus on religion and the predominance of what she called "orthodox" Muslim community leaders in the public debate about integration, especially at the Islam Conference hosted by Federal Interior Minister Schaeuble. Ahadi, author of the book "I Have Renounced Islam: Why I am for Freedom and against Islam," argued that western societies must become more active when human rights are violated in the name of Islam. Religion, she emphasized, was a private matter while integration was a question of "integrating people rather than religion." (Note: Ahadi, a former refugee and Iranian exile communist activist, has been criticized in the Iranian community for her uncompromising stances on both political and religious issues and has been accused of publicity-seeking. In press interviews prior to the conference, Bundestag MP Omid Nouripour (Greens)

said that while he respects Ahadi's biography, he regrets that she "defames an entire religious community." Representatives of the Iranian Dialogue Circle, a secular Berlin-based Iranian organization, called Ahadi a "Stalinist hardliner" who is "surfing on the wave of current Islamophobia" in order to gain attention. End Note.)

¶4. (U) In his keynote speech, Ralph Giordano (85), the prominent German Holocaust survivor, author, public intellectual, and opponent of the Cologne Mosque project, argued that German integration efforts at the state and federal level had "clearly failed." He proceeded to deliver a passionate plea affirming democratic values and human rights against what he called "opportunistic kowtowing" by his government to Muslim leaders at the expense of democracy and a free civil society. He also faulted intellectuals and proponents on the Left for not facing up to the threat to liberal democracies and women's rights by Islamic orthodoxy. Seeing inequality of the sexes and "authoritarianism" as "inherent in orthodox Islam that must be confronted by the public," Giordano claimed that in his experience many Muslim community leaders "pay lip service to the value of secular liberal democracy while propagating different values in their communities." In a provocative flourish, Giordano accused the Secretary General of the German Central Council of Muslims, Aiman Mazyek, of "doublespeak" and said that Mazyek (a German citizen) is free to leave Germany if he does not care for the German system.

¶5. (U) A panel of mostly ex-Muslim women from Great Britain, the Netherlands, Denmark and Germany examined the situation of Muslim women in their respective countries, offering specific details of inequality and repression. The speakers sought to establish counterpart organizations in other countries, pointing to the U.S., Canada, Australia and other European states as having potential. They reiterated that it was essential to "put people first and not religion" in the integration debate and that religion should be considered a private, not public, matter.

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¶6. (U) Referring to difficulties in finding a conference venue, members of the Council acknowledged that they are regularly confronted with charges of Islamophobia and racism, which they said they completely rejected. They considered it "indicative of the lack of democratic conviction" that Muslim leaders in Germany often denounce them in this manner "while avoiding a rational critical debate of Islam" and even threatening ex-Muslims for speaking out.

¶7. (U) The conference's closing statement, passed by participants, outlines both its commitment to guaranteeing individual freedoms and continuing its critique of Islam and conservative Muslim-German organizations. Building on its approach of integration as an individual process, the statement calls for a commitment to secularism in education; the right to free speech, including to criticize patriarchy and anti-Semitism in Muslim communities, as well as human rights violations committed in the name of Islam; increased diplomatic efforts by the German government in advocating against human rights violations committed in Muslim countries. The resolution makes no reference to the possibility of a progressive or reformed Islam; instead, it criticizes references to Islam as a peace-loving and tolerant religion and refers to Islam as a "two-faced" political religion. The resolution also condemns the Interior Ministry's attempt to grant conservative Muslim organizations a meaningful role in integration, as these organizations "want to prevent real integration."

Comment

¶8. (SBU) The German Council of ex-Muslims raise important political and philosophical issues that reflect views and concerns represented in various parts of German society (Christian conservative, parts of the Lutheran Church, as well as Germany's largely secular moderates and left-wingers) about

how best to integrate immigrants with Muslim backgrounds. However, the Council's relatively small membership and, at times, strident and uncompromising rhetoric may hinder their attempts to mobilize larger portions of the German public. Ex-Muslim leaders at the conference strongly rejected hints or accusations of racism or Islamophobia, arguing that the integration debate focuses too much on Islamic faith rather than on the development of individual identities. Interior Ministry officials at the federal and state levels are well aware of this challenge. There is value to monitoring the Council and its evolving presence on the German sociopolitical stage.

19. (U) This message has been coordinated with Embassy Berlin.
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